

THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Do Not Be Afraid

April 4, 1999

John M. Buchanan

The Easter message says that all the tenderness and strength, which on Good Friday we saw scourged, buffeted, stretched out on a cross - all that beauty and goodness are again alive and with us now, not as a memory that inevitably fades, but as an undying presence in the life of every one of us, if only we would recognize it. Christ's resurrection promises our own, for Christ is risen *pro nobis* - for us - to put love in our hearts, decent thoughts in our heads, and a little more iron up our spines. Christ is risen to convert us, not from life to something more than life, but from something less than life to the possibility of full life itself If we don't know *what* is beyond the grave we do know *who* is beyond the grave. God has done God's part. Now its up to us.

William Sloane Coffin

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH



A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Jeremiah 31: 1-6

Matthew 27:62-28:10

"... Jesus said to them 'Do not be afraid. . .'" (Matthew 28:10)

Startle us, O God, with your truth. Open our hearts and minds to the good news that Jesus Christ is risen. Open our spirits and our intellects to the news that life is ever the Lord of death and that love shall never lose its own, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Newsweek magazine, in an Easter issue several years ago, reported that eighty-seven percent of the American people say they believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, although many—perhaps most—remain uncertain how to understand their belief. Theologian Douglas Ottati passes that information along in an essay, "Meaning and Mystery of Resurrection." (*Hopeful Realism*, p.51).

Before we get to "Meaning and Mystery," let's think about that 87 percent. It's remarkable-- an astonishing degree of unanimity in a country where nobody agrees on much of anything. What is apparent to clergy—but particularly to church ushers throughout the land, is that all 87 percent are trying to find a seat in a pew somewhere this morning and, in that the churches have nowhere near that many pews, it is going to get a little crowded and some are not going to get to sit where they want, and some may have to stand, or be relegated to the fellowship hall, and some may not get in at all, and it won't be pretty.

And another 87 percent of all the ministers facing all those people today are going to engage in a little petulance and scold them for coming to church only on Easter. Some writers even suggest to us that you'll be disappointed if the minister doesn't do it: try something cute like refer to the fact that theologically, Easter Sunday is like Super Bowl Sunday but, in fact, we play a full schedule-- we do this every week. So there you have it. We'll do this again next Sunday at 8:30 and 11:00 and we can almost guarantee you a seat.

I've never been much interested in that, frankly. If I only came to church once a year, this is the day I would come. I know the flowers are going to be gorgeous, the music stirring, everybody will be dressed beautifully, and there will be a note of excitement in the air.

I think everybody comes to church on Easter Sunday because everybody knows that what this day is about is the most important, most urgent, most compelling matter in the world.

We get dressed up and come to church today because on the agenda today is a matter, literally, of life and death.

Walter Brueggemann, distinguished Biblical scholar, was speaking recently to a group of pastors of large churches, which is to say, professionals who have enjoyed a measure of success, at least in terms of the size of their congregation, which isn't, by the way, a very reliable indicator of anything, but that is another story, and besides, I was in the group. Professor Brueggemann, one of the most erudite and sophisticated Christian intellectuals around these days, said to this group of fairly sophisticated preachers: Remember when you awoke in the middle of the night as a child and were certain that the shadows outside your window were some kind of terrible monster, and the creaking of the stairs assured you that something awful was about to happen, and you cried out, and your father or mother appeared in your room and took you in his or her arms and said the most important words in the world, "Don't be afraid. It's all right!"

That, Professor Brueggemann said, is what Christian faith is about. From beginning to end the blessed benedictions of scripture can be summarized in two words: "Fear not."

It's what God says to the people terrified and lost in the wilderness. "Fear not."

It's what the angels say to the shepherds: "Fear not, we bring tidings of great joy"

It's what the angel says to the woman at the empty tomb: "Fear not."

It's what Jesus says to them all: "Do not be afraid."

Don't you love the way Matthew sets it up? It's Saturday, the day after the matter was finally resolved, if not to everyone's satisfaction, at least in a way that should have put the incident to rest and allowed everybody to move on. Pilate, the governor, whose name we remember every Sunday when we say what we believe, was never very enthusiastic about it. To his credit, he tried to find some way to resolve the dispute among his noisy, fanatical subjects without resorting to a public execution. But since there were two executions already scheduled for Friday, in time to be completed before the Sabbath, he finally relented and added Jesus of Nazareth to the list, but not before washing his hands of the whole nasty business.

So now it's Saturday and all is quiet and here they come again, that group of religious fanatics who had badgered him all week, who kept arguing, pleading, warning, almost threatening him to deal aggressively with the trouble-maker, the political traitor from Nazareth. He had become tired of the whole business, and of them, and if truth be told, at least part of the reason he did what he did was to make them go away and leave him alone. And here they were, back again.

Sir, remember how we told you he said he was going to rise again? Well, sir, his disciples are fanatics and they're smart, and if we—you, sir, don't keep an eye on them, they'll steal his body and then go around talking about a resurrection and it will get a whole lot worse around here than it was on Friday afternoon, if you don't mind us telling you, sir. So why don't you just assign some guards to the tomb to assure that nothing happens.

And Pilate, in what I think are some of the most enigmatic words ever spoken, says to them "You have a guard of soldiers." Apparently the Romans assigned some soldiers to the Temple and gave the Chief priest the authority to use them to keep the peace—"You have a guard of soldiers: go, make it as secure as you can"

They're frightened old men. They're afraid that someone will steal the body. But I think they're really afraid of something else. They're afraid that it might actually happen: that he might rise up and walk out of that tomb. And if that happens, nothing will ever be the same. If crucifixion doesn't end this, then crucifixion loses its power. If death isn't the end, death is not quite as powerful as we assume it is. If he gets up and walks away, the threat of death won't be effective any longer, the fear of death will be banished, and who knows what that will mean. If somehow God puts a stamp of approval on him by raising him from the dead, why that means God is raising up everything he said and did: God is blessing what he taught about love and what he did when he welcomed the unclean, the sinners, the tax collectors and prostitutes as well as the Pharisees and lawyers. Why, if he is alive, we have it all wrong. We're going to have to go back and start all over again and learn how to think and live in a whole new way. So let's secure the tomb.

And Pilate, I think, sees right through it—sees what they're really afraid of, knows that if God is going to do something, no guard of soldiers, no legion, no earthly power or authority is going to stop it. So he says "make it as secure as you can."

There are two operational fears here. The fear of death and the fear of life. They are connected, by the way. You and I are not free to live life fully so long as we live in the fear of death. We are not free to love without reservation, to withhold nothing from our love of the beautiful world, our nation, our community, our church, our families, our dearly beloved ones, one another, so long as we are held captive by the fear of death.

In fact, there is something paralyzing about fear: something that reduces the scope of our lives, the extent of our love, the depth of our giving. Life begins, Peter Gomes says "when you realize that by removing the fear of death, Christ has given you, for the first time, full possession of your own life."

Like those old men coming back to Pilate to try to secure their world from God's newness, God's energy, God's inclusiveness, unconditional love, God's new creation, so we, in our fear, refuse to see and participate in the newness God will create for us.

Fear, not sin, is the curse on human life, Peter Gomes says. Fear that the plane will crash keeps some people home all the time. Fear of failing sometimes prevents us from trying something new, taking new risks professionally, personally, and we settle for securing the old, the familiar, the safe.

Fear of loneliness sometimes forces us into unhealthy relationships and keeps us in them, until there is nothing much left of life and love.

Fear of exposing our humanness, fear of new ways of relating, keeps us from picking up the phone and making an appointment with a counselor, therapist, psychiatrist, minister.

Fear of sickness can be obsessive. Fear that the malignancy will return can paralyze us emotionally, spiritually, physically.

Who is not afraid of what is happening in Kosovo and Yugoslavia and Albania? Who is not afraid that we have made a mistake: that the repercussions of our acts may be worse than anything we can imagine.

It is appropriate to acknowledge those fears: to pray for all the innocent victims, particularly those singled out for exile, persecution and death because of their ethnicity and their religion. It is not a day for pontificating or for partisan politics.

It is not a day for pulpit oversimplifying. But I feel led to affirm, on this Easter Sunday, this day that celebrates the victory of life over death in all its horror and finality, to affirm my support for my nation's participation in the NATO initiative, and my pride, tempered by sadness that once again bombs are falling, but nevertheless my gratitude that we will take risks and make difficult, sometimes dreadful decisions, because we will not simply stand by and watch the power of oppression and evil and death take its toll.

Fear not.

Personally, the big question is: Does it ultimately matter? Is it all worthwhile? Does it matter how I live, how I love, how I give my life away? Are the struggles worth anything finally? It's the oldest, most urgent question anybody ever asked. Do you ever find yourself wondering: Does it matter, ultimately, whether or not I live with a sense of purpose and a commitment to making the world a better place? Are the struggles to make the world more Christlike—struggles which take the mundane form of attending meetings, and raising money and lobbying for legislation; hard work of building communities that honor the young and old, and provide for education and health and public safety for all people. . . does it all matter in the end? The strong message of this day is yes, it matters. Nothing is lost of love and passion and commitment. Nothing is wasted. Your life lived in the freedom of love, the freedom given to you this day by Christ's victory over death, matters forever.

Fear not. Do not be afraid to live. And do not be afraid to die. My friend Glen, in one of our talks before he died, mentioned Easter, and said "that's the day we want to hear the real stuff, the genuine article: no beating around the bush, just tell us whether or not it's all true."

And that's why we're here today. To tell one another the truth—that because of what God has done in Jesus Christ we don't have to be afraid. Anne Lamott says courage is fear that has said its prayers. (*Traveling Mercies*, p.239) And so we're not talking about trivializing the reality of death or the fear of the reality of death. It comes to all of us in one way or another: the death of our parents, friends, acquaintances and, of course, our own aging, what someone called the "insult of our own mortality."

The resurrection of Jesus Christ means we can look at it openly and honestly and not be afraid: not tremble before it because ultimate issues have been resolved. We can even afford to laugh.

A little boy was attending his first funeral. His experience with his great-aunt Gladys had not been particularly pleasant. She was grouchy, not very happy, not fond of children in general and, it seemed to him, simply didn't like him at all. At the funeral he leaned over to his mother and in a voice heard for several pews in either direction asked, "Where is she now?" His mother, aware that a lot of people were listening, gave the stock parental answer: "Aunt Gladys has gone to be with God." The little boy thought about that for a moment, rolled his eyes heavenward and announced, "Poor God."

Death is not funny. But death, we believe, does not have the final word about us. God does. And it is a word of everlasting love and strength and victory.

We don't know what will become of us, but we know who waits for us, and whose love will shelter us and keep us forever.

My friend, Jim Lowry, pastor of the Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis is one of the most eloquent preachers I know. He wrote an article in a journal recently that suggested that what gets said at funerals is among the most important articulations of faith. And he shares with his readers some of his own work. Lucille Barrow Lane died at 90, full of years, dignity and grace, wife, mother, grandmother, lively, devoted, faithful servant of Jesus Christ. "Teal" was the name everyone called her.

Lowry invited the large congregation that gathered for her funeral to engage in a bit of playful imagination.

"Call me a dozen or more of our finest angels, said the Lord of Love and Life. Call them from among our most zesty tribe and tell them to go make ready the place prepared for Lucille Barrow Lane.

'Who?' asked Simon Peter

'Teal' said the Lord of Love and Life

'Oh' said Simon Peter, 'Why didn't you say so?'

'Tell the angels to be sure the garden is trimmed just so, and to fill the pantry with all manner of preserves and good things to eat, and to put lots of jewelry of sparkling good taste on the dressing table, and fill the bowl with our choicest punch.'

'Right away,' said the kind but crusty old disciple who seems never to tire of ushering in the countless hosts.

'Then,' said the Lord of love, 'send one of the angels to go find Hunter, her husband. Tell him his waiting is almost done.'"

Lowry concluded: "That's not the way it is. Of course it isn't. Eternity is much better than my imagination can possibly see . . . This much we do know as a simple fact of faith: there is nothing—nothing in life, nothing in death, nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We do not and cannot know what the future holds. But we do know who holds it. We know who waits for us.

Douglas Ottati, the scholar, put it simply:

"We belong to God in death. The great God of glory is the God of grace. God is faithful. . . Resurrection faith means that, as we may live in non-defensive confidence, so we may die in the confidence that God-in Christ is faithful, and that the chief end of human beings is to glorify God and enjoy God forever."

So, good friends. Sing the triumphant music, and enjoy the flowers, and allow yourself to love life, to embrace life a little more passionately, and be a little more extravagant with your love and with your life.

Give it away. Give it to what matters most---to the people God has given you to love, to the good causes that honor all of God's children, to God's church.

Live with abandon. Live in freedom.

"Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here: he has been raised. . . he is going ahead of you. . ."

Thanks be to God. Amen.